

GUARD YOUR LIPS

BIBLE STUDY - JAMIE MCNAB

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Today I want to return to a topic that I have spoken on at least a couple of times before over the last five or ten years. This is a very important topic; but also one which is very practical, because it affects our conduct throughout our waking hours.

I want to look again at our words – how we use our tongues. Do we use them for good or bad, for blessing or cursing, for life or death? Because, if we do not learn to use our words properly – in the way that God instructs us – our tongues can harm both us and other people. Or they can bless us and other people. If you think about it, the ability to speak – to communicate in words – really is a godly attribute. Animals, birds and fish communicate to a degree – but very basically compared to human beings with our various range of topics, knowledge, moods, thoughts and dreams in which we can communicate.

Our ability to speak words really is a godly characteristic; but unfortunately there is a tendency for us to be rather careless with our words. We fail, too often, to realize the importance of controlling our words and choosing our words. Scripture has a lot to say about this.

So, today's message will be the first of three or four, and I have entitled it, "Guard your Lips."

Proverbs 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

If we take this scripture as it is written, it says that *death* and *life* are in the power of the tongue. That sounds to me like the tongue is quite important and quite influential, if indeed the tongue has the power of life and death. Both would probably be the extremes, but in between death and life, there is a lot of discouragement, or a lot of despair that can be brought about by our tongues. I think it is fairly evident to all of us, that words can be encouraging; can build us up, can build up and inspire other people. If you think about it, preaching the Word

of God brings life, brings hope, brings truth. Equally, of course, we know that the opposite is also true – that words can discourage, they can hurt people, they can break up families, and they can destroy careers.

Words can drive some people to despair, and even to suicide. So, at their extreme, *your* words according to scripture have the power of life and death. And it says here in Proverbs that “those who love it will eat its fruit.” There is fruit from our words. Our words can produce both good and bad; and you and I often eat the fruit of our own lips.

One of the translations says, “*Life and death are in the power of the tongue, and they that rule it shall eat the fruits thereof.*” I quite like that. It implies that you and I should be able to rule our tongues, to rule our words, and to choose our words carefully. And then, of course, if we choose our words carefully and wisely, the fruit that we produce will be good fruit, up building fruit, the fruit of life. We can probably all remember that in times past, we have said some rather good things, and encouraged ourselves and others; but equally we have been a bit careless, and did not think too much, and blurted out something that caused harm. Now in most cases the harm can be healed, but sometimes it is too late. Sometimes, we open our mouths and speak and it is done, and you cannot unravel it; and that can be harmful.

Just to show you the importance of words, I remember some years back, probably twenty years ago, there was a famous Jeweler’s chain in Britain called Ratner’s. It was a family company with stores in all parts of the country. They were not highly priced; you could get rings, earrings, belly-button rings, nose rings, candelabras, sherry and port glasses, and whatever else you would want to buy. Once, at a private function, Gerald Ratner was speaking – apparently privately; but there were some people there that took his comments away and leaked them to the press. He said, apparently in good humor, “How come the goods are so cheap in our shops?” And he said, (excuse the language), “Because they are total c**p.” Amazingly, within about a week, the word was out, and the value of that business dropped by five hundred million pounds, that is nearly a billion dollars. This was all because of one man’s words. They almost went bankrupt and, in fact, Mr. Gerald Ratner was thrown out within a few months. A few careless words destroyed his future, his destiny, his company and the livelihoods of many people who served in his shops; and, of course, hugely disappointed the owners of Ratner’s Jewellery. So words *can* be important. The scriptures say that the fruit that words can produce are death and life.

Matthew 12:36-37 "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Are words important? It looks like it! Jesus said, "by your words you will be justified" – accepted and made righteous; or alternatively, "by your words you will be condemned." Which would you rather be? Justified or condemned? Are *your* words important? Yes! Is the power of life and death in *your* words? Yes!

Looking again at verse 36 again, "*But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment.*" What is an idle word? The Greek gives us some other synonyms – *inactive, useless*. We know that every useless, inactive, non-productive, empty, idle, meaningless word that we may speak, we will give account of it in the Day of Judgment.

I think that we all recognize that our society is full of useless words. Television and radio have some good things on them, but there is also a huge amount of useless, idle, empty, vain and futile words that surround us. You know that for a fact. Just as is the case with talk-shows and the words used in texting. How many vain, empty, inactive, pointless, idle words surround us every single day? We are not immune to that. So a question might be, "Are *our* words productive?" If you are called to give an account of your words, what you speak about, what you are saying, the words that you use from when you wake up in the morning until you tumble into bed at night, your words and my words – how do they look? Are they idle words? Are they words that produce life, or are they words that produce death? Are they words that build up, or are they words that tear down? Our words do demonstrate and allow us to see what is in our hearts.

Matthew 12:34 "Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

That is a true statement, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Whatever fills your heart to overflowing, that is what you and I say. So when we hear our words, when God hears our words, when others hear our words, it is actually giving away, very often, what is *in our heart* – because, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" Or as I have often said, "the mouth leaks"! Sometimes when we are not really paying attention and are not really focused on our words and what is in our heart, oops! It just leaks out.

Matthew 12:34 A good man (*or woman*) out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

We have commented in the past on “the heart and mouth connection,” and that is demonstrated here. What the mouth often speaks reveals what is in the heart; and an evil heart produces evil sayings, evil things, evil fruit, and ultimately, of course, death; whereas a good heart produces good fruit, and fruit that would lead to life. The question that we have is, “What is our conversation? What do our words reveal about what is in our hearts?” Remember – death and life! Just to reinforce the importance of our conversation, the importance of our words, Jesus said in verse 37, “*For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*”

Life and death are in the power of our words. Jesus confirms that.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.

Of course, we can sacrifice to God with praise. It says in Hebrews that the praise of our lips can be a sacrifice to God; but it says here in Ecclesiastes that, when we go to the house of God and draw near, we should be more hearing, more listening; and whether it is a physical sacrifice or whether it is the sacrifice of a fool with his empty words, it says that they do not know that they do evil.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few.

It says, “Do not be rash.” One translation says, “Do not be hasty in word, or impulsive in thought, but be careful.” It says, “Guard your lips.” It implies more than just at the House of God; but that is the particular place when you are communing with God, when you are spending time with God, and you must be careful what you say. Do not be rash with your mouth, do not be hasty, especially before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few. Let them be carefully chosen, carefully selected.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed — Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to

sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?

The principle being brought out here is: Say what you mean, and do it! Do not make a vow to God; do not make any promise to God; do not make any commitment to God with your words, and then fail to deliver. It says that God is not pleased by that. He wants us to use our words properly. He is not impressed by idle words, inactive words, non-productive words. He makes it very plain that when you and I are talking to God, dealing with God, it says, "Go into the House of God, let your words be few, do not be rash with your mouth," do not jump to saying things. Be careful, because if you make any commitment, be ready to deliver it. God is not impressed by idle words, by cheap talk, and by meaningless statements. The general principle is that, no matter what you and I are up to, we should be a people who say what we mean, and then we do it. Empty talk, empty promises, boastful statements and abject failure to deliver reveals bad character, and it is not impressive at all. Of course, if we are saying things and not delivering, then we are creating a problem, and we are not faithful.

We should be very careful with what we say and be very careful if we make any commitments, especially to our God, that we deliver on them, even if it is to our own hurt.

Psalms 15:1 LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?

Who are these people that can dwell with God? Who are these people who can live with the Father? Who are those who can dwell in God's Holy tabernacle? Who are they? What are their characteristics? The answer is:

Psalms 15:2 He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart;

Here is the "speaking and heart connection" again. This person speaks what is true; and speaking what is true is good. Speaking deceit is not good.

Psalms 15:3 He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;

And that would typically be through words. We will see increasingly that how we use our tongues is very important. Here, people who are backbiting, people who are condemnatory, people who are critical, people

who have the old gossip problem – that is not what God gave us our tongues for, and that is leading to death and not to life.

Psalms 15:4 In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LORD; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

This person keeps his or her word, even if it costs them, because their word is important – their word is good. You can depend on their word and, if you think about it, God’s word is important to us because we know that it is dependable, it is reliable, it is forever settled in heaven. God’s word does not change and God cannot lie. You and I, as followers of God, should have the same characteristics – one of which is that, if we have made a commitment – one that we should think through first, of course, and possibly think again, maybe even think yet again! But once we have made a commitment – once we have said we will do something – then the man or woman who dwells in God’s tabernacle is a person who swears to his own hurt, and does not change; he is that reliable.

Psalms 15:5 He who does not put out his money at usury, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

So we want our word to be good and dependable, not inactive, inoperable, idle or useless. God is looking for people whose word is good, who speak the truth in their heart, who do not backbite and condemn, and whose words are not harmful and destructive words.

Of course, we talk all day long and so we have plenty of opportunity to test our words, and to ensure that they are words that lead and tend to life, and not the other way.

Psalms 34:11-12 Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?

Who is that person that desires life? Do *you* desire life? Would *you* like many days that you can “see good” in? I would! And I think that most of us would. We desire life; we want life abundantly; and we do not want many days of abject poverty, many days of struggling, or many days of seeing grim things around us. But it

says here, “Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?” We all do! Here is one of the ways that you can do that:

Psalms 34:13 Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

That is the first thing he mentions. Do you want to live for a long time? Do you desire good for all of those days? Okay, “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.” This word “deceit” can mean saying one thing but meaning another.

Psalms 34:14-15 Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry.

So if we are living that way of life, God’s eyes are upon us and His ears are attentive to us. We must keep our tongue from speaking evil and our lips from speaking guile.

The scriptures, from Genesis to Malachi, instruct us in how we should choose our words carefully, how we should be honest and true, and shun deceit, gossip, backbiting and all of the rest of it.

There is a key there, “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.” This is something that we can do if we want to enjoy a good life. And if we want to have good fruit, remember, those who rule their tongues will eat the fruit thereof. But we want *good* fruit, we want happiness, joy, wisdom, a long life, and we want friends. All of the good things come from guarding our lips, and choosing our words carefully.

Psalms 39:1 I said, "I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, while the wicked are before me."

This means that we must be alert. Do not just open up your mouth and start rattling away. Our words are important, and they can influence us; they can influence the lives of others. There is a time when you and I need to restrain our lips as with a muzzle. The old saying is, “Engage the brain, before operating the mouth.” We must have self control, and not be too hasty with our words, not just rattling away and saying things that are not conducive to life. They need to build up and encourage, and they must be pure and right in God’s sight.

But words that are cheap, tacky, nasty, harmful, destructive, and that pull down and degrade are not the words that come out of the mouth of a human being made in the image and likeness of God.

Proverbs 29:20 Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

It does not say that he *is* a fool, but that there is more chance of a fool having a successful life than a man, or woman who is hasty or rash in his or her words. Remember, Ecclesiastes says, “Do not let your words be rash when you go to the House of God.” You and I do need to be watchful of our words, do not be so hasty, and think if what we are going to say is good. “Do I select my words carefully here, or just rattle off and think about it later?” That is often what we do, but that is not the best way to do it. Sometimes the vocabulary of silence is the wiser option. Most us, when growing up, heard from our parents, “If you cannot say something good about a person do not say anything at all.”

That is quite good advice, because the wrong words, wrongly spoken at the wrong time, words uttered hastily and impulsively, cannot be taken back; it is too late, the words are out, and the damage is done.

Sometimes, of course, we are damaging ourselves because what we say to ourselves has an effect, it is not just a question of what we say that might encourage or depress another person, what we say can actually harm ourselves. We have to be very careful about our words. It says that a person hasty in their words, just letting it all blurt out, there is more chance of a fool becoming a successful person than there is of that hasty person succeeding in life. Basically they are a disaster area, and you and I do not want to be in that category.

Proverbs 15:4 A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

A tongue that speaks good things, wholesome things, upbuilding things, encouraging things, one who speaks the truth, one who is honorable and noble. “A noble tongue is a tree of life.” What did the tree of life do? The tree of life was in paradise and provided access, if you wanted it, to everlasting life. So a wholesome tongue, a good tongue, a person who chooses their words wisely to build up and to encourage, words which are noble and true, and honest and decent are life-giving. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, but perverseness in the tongue breaks the spirit. That is harmful and destructive. A perverse or twisted spirit harms people and actually ourselves, and it breaks the spirit. Parents can do that sometimes unthinkingly. They say, “You are no good, you are absolutely hopeless” or “You will amount to nothing in school” or “You are just like your

father.” There are some kids, of course, where it just bounces off them, but there are others for whom it breaks the spirit; and those children never recover. Their entire lives, and even when married they are affected by the perverse speech and perverse tongue of the parents decades earlier. But on the other hand, a wholesome tongue to children is the tree of life. It builds up and encourages. “You can do that! Go for it!” Building up or tearing down? Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Those who love it and rule over it will eat the fruit thereof.

Proverbs 15:1-2 A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.

Again, when we are in conversation, if irritation, anger or wrath is starting to develop, a soft answer can calm that down, whereas otherwise we can throw some more fuel on the fire, can't we. That is not wise. Some years ago an experiment was conducted about choosing soft and calming words. They actually tried this in some telephone calls. People were phoning in, complaining, getting very agitated, angry and shouting. The people that were picking up the calls were being taught to speak in a softer voice. So the people phone up and they are irate because their washing machine has turned up late, or not at all, or it is broken yet again. There is noisy shouting, and the recipient listens attentively, but speaks back very softly. And, strangely enough, they found that, in most cases, it calmed the other party down. *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word.....”* “How dare you speak to me like that?” and the thing starts a battle and to escalate, and that does not help. *“The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.”*

The Hebrew implies the term, “belches.” The mouth of an idiot lets it all come out; but the wise persons use theirs tongue properly, and a soft answer turns away wrath. It is important that we are conscious and aware of the impact of our tongues. We will continue to see later the heart and mouth connection, and the words that we speak do reveal what is in our heart, we saw that earlier. Equally, if you are looking at working faith, first of all you have to believe in your heart and speak the words of faith. We have covered that in other messages.

If the people, mentioned in Numbers 13, had guarded their lips, and not been hasty towards God, things might have ended very differently, but this is what did happen because of the danger of their loose lips. There's was a mixed story. Ten spies had one version of the story and Joshua and Caleb had another version of the story:

Numbers 13:30-33 Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

They brought back a bad report. By the way, what *is* a bad report? They brought back *words*, but were they the words of life, of encouragement, words of faith? Did these words lift up the people to go and possess the land flowing with milk and honey, that God had promised? Or did these words discourage, produce fear, anxiety? Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and there was lots of death coming out of their tongues.

Numbers 14:1 So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.

That is the impact that those words had on the people.

Numbers 14:2 And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness!

This was a big mistake. "*If only we had died....*" Do words lift up, or pull down? Is death and life in the power of the tongue? What we believe in our hearts, we say with our mouths. "*If only we had died in this wilderness.*" That is what they said. Should they have said that? No! Are these things written down for our admonition? Yes! Did God hear what they said? Yes, He did, and He was not pleased; and things started to go very wrong for the Israelites. Moses intervened, because God was minded to virtually wipe them out, and he said to God please do not. God said, "I will hear you Moses."

Numbers 14:26-27 And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against Me? I have heard the complaints which the children of Israel make against Me.

God hears!

Numbers 14:28 Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the LORD, ‘just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you.’

In a sense, they had pronounced their own sentence. They believed in their hearts that they were going to die in the wilderness. That is precisely what came to pass, “*Just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you.*”

Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few.

They did not do this, but they opened their mouth and they said things which were harmful and injurious, plain wrong and provocative, and they got what they said. They said, “We are going to die in the wilderness,” and, of course, they *did* die in the wilderness.

Numbers 14:29-32 The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above. Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in. But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness.

Is death and life in the power of the tongue? Absolutely! They were the evidence of that, they all died due to what they said; and that revealed fundamentally what was in their heart. What scared them a lot were the giants, the warriors, the fortified cities, and the fact that they did not really believe in God, and they spoke words of death.

There is an opposite example that we can look at in I Samuel 17. This is a similar sort of scenario, vaguely, but a very different outcome.

I Samuel 17:3-5 The Philistines stood on a mountain on one side, and Israel stood on a mountain on the other

side, with a valley between them. And a champion went out from the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span.

Nobody is too sure about what a cubit was. It appears to be that Goliath was either, at the shorter end, about 9 foot 6 inches, or at the higher end, about 11 foot 10 inches. Either way he was a big lad!

I Samuel 17:5-7 He had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze (*which my margin says is 125 pounds of armour*). And he had bronze armour on his legs and a bronze javelin between his shoulders. Now the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his iron spearhead weighed six hundred shekels; and a shield-bearer went before him.

This is one big beast out there!

I Samuel 17:8-11 Then he stood and cried out to the armies of Israel, and said to them, "Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

They went hiding under bushes, because this was one mean hombre and they did not want to tangle with him. A little bit like ancient Israel: all those giants in the land and they were afraid. But there is a slight change in the story here:

I Samuel 17:32-37 Then David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God." Moreover David said, "The LORD, who

delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you!"

Saul said to David, "Go on then!" So David, unlike ancient Israel, said, "God will deliver us. He may be a giant, and they may be fortified cities, he may have armour, but God will deliver me, and I will succeed." A very different response; the words are different. Ancient Israel said, "We are going to die in this wilderness." David's words are, "I will fight, and God will deliver!"

I Samuel 17:33-47 So the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!" Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD'S, and He will give you into our hands."

We all know the rest of the story. There is a similar sort of environment. There was a giant here, and formerly there were giants, and the people of Israel feared in their hearts, spoke words of fear, and spoke words of unbelief and words of death. But David was very different; he believed God, he trusted God, and he spoke words of life; and God honored David's faith and He heard his words. You and I need to be aware that God hears *our* words; because, again, these things are written for our admonition.

James 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

The words that a teacher speaks can affect dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people. So he can influence for good or for bad; and he has to be very careful what he says.

James 3:2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

We must control our words, and this is something to aim at. Do you stumble in word? Do I? Certainly we are human and we do err from time to time. But if we can control our words, control our tongues, “then we are perfect men,” it says.

James 3:3 Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

If you control a horse’s mouth, you control his body.

James 3:4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.

Just a little thing controls a huge ship. A little bit in the horses mouth controls a great big lumbering cart-horse.

James 3:5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

A little tiny fire from a discarded cigarette or match can cause a blaze across a huge forest. A little tongue in our mouth can cause a huge amount of destruction.

James 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

Certainly we are given some interesting pictures here of just how dangerous a tongue can be.

James 3:7-8 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

I would take this to be “no *unconverted* man can tame the tongue.” But you and I, with the Spirit of God, *can* tame the tongue. God’s Spirit in us can help us control and exert discipline on the tongue. It says that the

tongue is full of deadly poison, and that is why we have to control it. Just let the tongue waggle and do its stuff, and it is like a poisonous serpent.

James 3:9-10 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

James is in effect saying, “How can you do this? How can you bless God, and at the same time use the same tongue to say bad words and evil words about your own brethren. It should not happen.”

James 3:11-12 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James means that our tongue should be pure. We should not be speaking out of the same mouth blessing and cursing. And, talking of cursing here, James does not primarily mean bad language and four-letter words. He is talking about cursing in the sense of devoting to destruction by our words. To bless is to assign favour to somebody by words. So, to James, to curse means to devote to destruction by the words that we speak, and to bless is to assign favour to somebody by the words that we speak.

Mark 11:12 Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.

Jesus is speaking to a tree! “I would never do that,” you might say. This is why we do not get the same results that Jesus got! Words are important, and here Jesus is speaking words to a tree. “*Jesus said to it, ‘Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.’ And His disciples heard it.*” That was a curse. Jesus had just devoted the tree to destruction. With His words he cursed the tree.

Mark 11:20-21 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

Jesus spoke words of harm because it was a corrupt tree.

Mark 11:22-23 So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.”

Is Jesus saying that you and I should be speaking to mountains? Talking of words that can influence and produce life and death, which we could address to a mountain, or to a tree? That is exactly what Jesus is saying.

Jesus says that, if we believe in our hearts and speak to the mountain, we will have whatever *we say*. If you do not *say it*, you do not get it. It is not thinking. It is not praying *to God* to move the mountain. It is believing in your heart and speaking words to the mountain; and then you will get what *you say*.

Mark 11:24 “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.”

Notice that Jesus is clearly teaching this in a positive sense. If there is something bad to move, some obstacle in your life, well speak to it! Do not speak to God and ask *Him* to move it. You or I should speak to it and, provided that we believe in our hearts, then the job is done. But equally, this can apply in a negative sense. If you believe bad in your heart and say it, then you are in danger of having whatever you say. You might say things like, “I just heard on the news that the Swine Flu is coming. I know that I will be the first to get it in our family, and it will last the longest in my body!” Or, when there are rumours of redundancy, you say, “I will be the first one to lose my job.” For Israel, they said, “We are going to die out here in the wilderness; we know that, we believe we are going to die.” They received just what they said. We have to be very careful. The scriptures illustrate how powerful our words are. Our words can move mountains. We still have to be careful not to harm others with our words. If our words are negative and injurious, we are in danger of cursing other people.

Genesis 27:1-4 Now it came to pass, when Isaac was old and his eyes were so dim that he could not see, that he called Esau his older son and said to him, "My son." And he answered him, "Here I am." Then he said,

"Behold now, I am old. I do not know the day of my death. Now therefore, please take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me. And make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die."

You see, blessing is bestowing favour on someone with our words. Isaac wanted to bestow very important favours and graces on his son. You know the story. Jacob and his Mum contrived to dress him up in goat-skins and hairy garments and to pass him off as Esau.

Genesis 27:22-29 So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. Then he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He said, "I am." He said, "Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's game, so that my soul may bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near now and kiss me, my son." And he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his clothing, and blessed him and said: "Surely, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed. Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!"

Those were blessings of prosperity, and national greatness; and it was passed on legally, formally, by words. Words actually have a real, proper, genuine – not imaginary – effect.

Then Esau arrived on the scene:

Genesis 27:30-37 Now it happened, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. He also had made savory food, and brought it to his father, and said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that your soul may bless me." And his father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" So he said, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." Then Isaac trembled exceedingly, and said, "Who? Where is the one who hunted game and brought it to me? I ate all of it before you came, and I have blessed him — and indeed he shall be blessed." When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said

to his father, "Bless me — me also, O my father!" But he said, "Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing." And Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!" And he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Then Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Indeed I have made him your master, and all his brethren I have given to him as servants; with grain and wine I have sustained him. What shall I do now for you, my son?"

The principle is that you cannot take back your words very easily. Once they are uttered, good or bad, it is often done and the consequences are on the way. The fruit of your lips has been released. Isaac could not take it back. Our words, you see, are important. These were words assigning favour. We have to be careful. We can bless with our words. Remember when the little children were brought to Jesus and the disciples wanted to push them away and told the people that He was far too busy? Jesus said, "No, let the little children come to me." It says that Jesus took them in His arms and He blessed them. That was not just some platitude like some Catholic nun or priest waving their arms around or sprinkling water on a child. Jesus was imparting favour to these children with His words, and His blessing.

There is an interesting illustration of the importance of words in Numbers 20:

Number 20:2 Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron.

So Moses and Aaron went to God for guidance.

Numbers 20:7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals."

Jesus later said, "Speak to the mountain, and if you believe in your heart it will move." Here, God says, "Speak to the rock, Moses, and it will yield its water." This is fairly straightforward and it certainly illustrates the importance and the impact of words. "Speak to the rock." Unfortunately, things went wrong, and for once Moses was rather disobedient:

Numbers 20:9-11 So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.

This is what they call "improvisation" and it is also deviating from instructions from God and getting off the path. God told Moses *to speak* to the rock, "Use your words on the rock, and honour me." But Moses *struck* the rock – twice.

Numbers 20:12 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Does this mean that Moses could not see that he could have spoken to the rock and it would have given water? The words of faith, you see! You and I have to believe in our hearts and "speak to the mountain."

Numbers 20:13 This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the LORD, and He was hallowed among them.

So it looks like Moses did *not* believe that his words could produce water from the rock; and so he relied on his strength and physical effort and he did not follow God's instruction. Now the principle here is that, if you and I deviate from God's instructions, what can we expect? Just because we are the called – the saints, the Church of God – does not mean that we can get away with ignoring and transgressing God's instructions. Moses could not, and he was probably a bit farther ahead than you and I are. But, God said, "Do *this!*" But where did Moses come from doing *that*? Also, it was not Moses' place to call them "rebels."

Psalms 106:32 They angered Him also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses on account of them;

The Israelites provoked Moses. He had dealt with them for a long time and they never stopped complaining, moaning and murmuring. None the less, that did not excuse Moses' behaviour. God said, "Speak to the rock." But he did not. He said, "You rebels! Shall *we* bring the water out for you?" Then - *bang, bang* on the rock!

Psalms 106:33 Because they rebelled against His Spirit, so that he (Moses) spoke rashly with his lips.

So the lesson for you and I is, hopefully, fairly clear. We have to be very careful with our words, and certainly must not be hasty with our words. Remember that there are some extremes.

Proverbs 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Death and life! It really is potentially as extreme as that. It is our choice. We pretty much control our own tongues – our own mouths; and it is our choice whether we use our tongues to produce the fruit of life or to produce the fruit of death. It is your choice, and it is my choice. Hopefully we have seen today that our words are very important, our words are very influential; and our words can build up, or they can destroy. They can produce life and they can produce death.

So, as the title of the message says, **Guard your lips!**

Transcript by Patricia Plunkett (many thanks Trish!)

